

How I Won the War

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DVD cover for *How I Won the War*
(John Lennon on cover)

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| Directed by | Richard Lester |
| Produced by | Richard Lester |
| Written by | Patrick Ryan (novel) Charles Wood |
| Starring | Michael Crawford John Lennon Roy Kinnear Jack MacGowran Michael Hordern Lee Montague Karl Michael Vogler |
| Music by | Ken Thorne |
| Cinematography | David Watkin |
| Editing by | John Victor-Smith |
| Studio | Petersham Pictures |
| Distributed by | United Artists |
| Release date(s) | October 18, 1967 (U.K.) October 23, 1967 (U.S.) |
| Running time | 109 minutes |
| Country | United Kingdom |
| Language | English |

How I Won the War is a black comedy film directed by Richard Lester, released in 1967. The film stars Michael Crawford as bungling British Army Officer Lieutenant Earnest Goodbody, with John Lennon (Musketeer Gripweed), Jack MacGowran (Musketeer Juniper), Roy Kinnear (Musketeer Clapper) and Lee Montague (Sergeant Transom) as soldiers under his command. The film uses an inconsistent variety of styles — vignette, straight-to-camera, and, extensively, parody of the war film genre, docu-drama, and popular war literature — to tell the story of 3rd Troop, the 4th Musketeers (a fictional regiment reminiscent of the Royal Fusiliers) and their misadventures in the Second World War. This is told in the comic/absurdist vein throughout, a central plot being the setting-up of an “Advanced Area Cricket Pitch” behind enemy lines in Tunisia, but it is all broadly based on the Allied landings in North Africa in 1942 to the crossing of the last intact bridge on the Rhine at Remagen in 1945.

Principal character and plot

The main character, Lieutenant Goodbody, is an inept, idealistic, naïve, and almost relentlessly jingoistic wartime—commissioned (not regular) officer. One of the main subversive themes in the film must be the platoon's repeated attempts or temptations to kill or otherwise rid themselves of their complete liability of a commander. In fact, with dead-weight heavy ironics, while Lieutenant Goodbody's ineptitude and attempts at derring-do lead to the gradual demise of his entire unit, Goodbody survives, together with one of his charges who finishes the film confined to psychiatric care and the unit's persistent deserter. In a heavy macabre device, each deceased soldier is replaced by a silent, ghostly figure in immaculate World War I uniform whose face is obscured by netting, and whose uniform from head to toe is brightly coloured red / green / orange etc. much like toy soldiers, underscoring Goodbody's lack of adult connection with his duties.

Cast

- Michael Crawford as Lieutenant Earnest Goodbody
- John Lennon as Gripweed
- Roy Kinnear as Clapper
- Lee Montague as Sergeant Transom
- Jack MacGowran as Juniper
- Michael Hordern as Grapple
- Jack Hedley as Melancholy Musketeer
- Karl Michael Vogler as Odlebog
- Ronald Lacey as Spool
- James Cossins as Droque
- Ewan Hooper as Dooley
- Alexander Knox as American General
- Robert Hardy as British General
- Sheila Hancock as Mrs. Clapper's Friend

Narrative and themes

In writing the script, the author, Charles Wood, borrowed themes and dialogue from his surreal and bitterly dark (and banned) anti-war play 'Dingo'. In particular the character of the spectral clown 'Juniper' is closely modelled on the Camp Comic from the play, who likewise uses a blackly comic style to ridicule the fatuous glorification of war. Goodbody narrates the film retrospectively, more or less, while in conversation with his German officer captor, 'Odlebog', at the Rhine bridgehead in 1945. From their duologue emerges another key source of subversion — the two officers are in fact united in their class attitudes and officer-status contempt for (and ignorance of) their men. While they admit that the question of the massacre of Jews might divide them, they equally admit that it is not of prime concern to either of them. Goodbody's jingoistic patriotism finally relents when he accepts his German counterpart's accusation of being, in principle, a Fascist. They then resolve to settle their disagreements on a commercial basis (Odlebog proposes *selling* Goodbody the last intact bridge over the Rhine; in the novel the bridge is identified as that at Remagen) which could be construed as a satire on unethical business practices and capitalism. This sequence also appears in the novel. Fascism amongst the British is previously mentioned when Gripweed (Lennon's character) is revealed to be a former follower of Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, though Colonel Grapple (played by Michael Hordern) sees nothing for Gripweed to be embarrassed about, stressing that "Fascism is something you grow out of". One monologue in the film concerns Musketeer Juniper's lament — while impersonating a high-ranked officer — about how officer material is drawn from the working and lower class, and *not* (as it used to be) from the feudal aristocracy.

The Regiment

In the novel, Patrick Ryan chose not to identify a real Army unit for reasons that can be easily guessed at - the image presented is not favourable. The officers chase wine and glory, the soldiers chase sex and evade the enemy. The model is clearly a regular infantry regiment forced, in wartime, to accept temporary commissioned officers like Goodbody into its number, as well as returning reservists called back into service. In both world wars this has provided a huge bone of contention for regular regiments, where the exclusive esprit de corps is a highly valued and safeguarded thing. As already mentioned, the name Musketeers recalls the Royal Fusiliers, but the later mention of the "Brigade of Musketeers" recalls the Brigade of Guards. In the film, the regiment is presented as a cavalry regiment (armoured with tanks or light armour, such as the half-tracks) that has been adapted to "an independent role as infantry". The platoon of the novel has become a troop, a Cavalry designation. None of these features come from the novel, such as the use of half-tracks and Transom's appointment as "Corporal of Musket", which suggests the cavalry title Corporal of Horse. These aspects are most likely due to the screenwriter Charles Wood being a former regular army cavalryman. There is no suggestion in the regiment's name of an allusion to *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas, and it is probably coincidence that Richard Lester went on to make four films based on the Dumas stories.

Comparison with the novel

The novel – more subtle than the film though perhaps even more subversive – uses none of the absurdist/surrealist devices associated with the film and differs greatly in style and content. The novel represents a far more conservative, structured (though still comic) war memoir, told by a sarcastically naïve and puerile Lieutenant Goodbody in the first person. It follows an authentic chronology of the war consistent with one of the long-serving regular infantry units – for example of the 4th Infantry Division – such as the 2nd Royal Fusiliers, including (unlike the film) the campaigns in Italy and Greece. Rather than surrealism the novel offers some quite chillingly vivid accounts of Tunis and Cassino. Patrick Ryan served as an infantry and then a reconnaissance officer in the war. Throughout, the author's bitterness at the pointlessness of war, and the battle of class interests in the hierarchy, are common to the film, as are most of the characters (though the novel predictably includes many more than the film).

Comparison with *Candide*

It has been pointed out, including by Leslie Halliwell, that there are echoes of Voltaire's *Candide* in the story, especially in the continual, improbable, inexplicable reappearance of Colonel Grapple. Grapple is supposed to be Lieutenant Goodbody's old Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU) Training Officer, full of ruthless, old-school British Empire optimism (rather than the Leibnizian optimism of *Candide*'s Pangloss). Another frequently reappearing feature is Musketeer Clapper's endless series of hopeless personal problems, invariably involving his wife's infidelities. Only the second of these recurring scenes is found in the novel, and in this case, unlike *Candide*, the optimism always comes from the innocent Goodbody (Candide), never Clapper.

Criticism

How I Won The War has never been critically well received, but its status as a curiosity — if only as John Lennon's only non-Beatles film role, being done just after the Beatles stopped touring — seems assured. Its collation of images and tableaux is darker and less structured than its anti-war contemporary *Oh! What a Lovely War*, the drama is not as terrifyingly unhinged as the later *Catch-22*, and it does not come across with the humane compassion of *MASH*. Though there are some memorable exchanges between characters, and fragments of battle scenes that carry a strangely disturbing ring of truth, the script is very largely composed of intentional non-sequiturs, mostly based on British Army slang, and this along with the ongoing barrage of textbook Brechtian estrangement techniques makes it perennially difficult to know what the film is aiming to do. Lester himself, acknowledging this, argued that most

"anti-war" films still treat war in a rational manner, while he tried to disassemble it to the pure perversion of everything human he found it to be.

Continuing on the absurdist tone established in *Help!* and considering this film an artistic success, United Artists gave Richard Lester free rein to create his next film, the nuclear war satire *The Bed-Sitting Room*. The three films accidentally constitute a trilogy that has developed a cult audience since their initial releases between 1965-70.

The film was made on Almería (Spain) in the fall of 1966. Lennon, taking a long-overdue break from the Beatles after nearly four years of constant touring, agreed to play the role of Gripweed in the film. It has been said that Lennon had written "Strawberry Fields Forever" during his time on the set; he began to compose the theme at the apartments (today Hostel Delfin Verde) where he was the first weeks of shooting the movie and finish up composing in the Finca Santa Isabel, now Museum of Cinema in memory of John Lennon. The film's release was delayed by 6 months as Richard Lester went on to work on *Petulia* (1968), shortly after completing *How I Won The War*.

Lennon, soon after the Beatles decided to stop touring, got a haircut to prepare for his role, contrasting sharply with his Beatle mop-top image. During filming, he started wearing round glasses, and continued to do so for several years afterwards. A photo of Lennon with haircut and glasses found its way into many print publications, most notably the front page of the very first issue of *Rolling Stone Magazine* released in November of 1967.

External links

- *How I Won the War* ^[1] at the Internet Movie Database
- Feature at Britmovie ^[2]
- Reenactment unit inspired by 4th Batt. of Musketeers ^[3]

References

[1] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061789/>

[2] <http://www.britmovie.co.uk/1970/01/01/i-saw-a-film-today-oh-boy/>

[3] <http://tommy.militaryclub.info/home.html>

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